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Boom economy covered up the rot in U.S. education

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Speaking of financial crises and how they can expose weak companies and weak countries, Warren Buffett once famously quipped that "only when the tide goes out do you find out who is not wearing a bathing suit." So true. But what's really unnerving is that America appears to be one of those countries that has been swimming buck naked - in more ways than one.

Credit bubbles are like the tide. They can cover up a lot of rot. In our case, the excess consumer demand and jobs created by our credit and housing bubbles have masked not only our weaknesses in manufacturing and other economic fundamentals, but something worse: How far we have fallen behind in K-12 education and how much it is now costing us.

That is the conclusion I drew from a new study by the consulting firm McKinsey, "The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools."

Just a quick review: In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States dominated the world in K-12 education. We also dominated economically. In the 1970s and 1980s, we still had a lead, albeit smaller, in educating our population through secondary school, and America continued to lead the world economically, albeit with other big **economies**, like China, closing in.

Today, we have fallen behind in both per-capita high school graduates and their quality. Consequences to follow.

For instance, in the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment that measured the applied learning and problem-solving skills of 15-year-olds in 30 industrialized countries, the United States ranked 25th out of 30 in math and 24th out of 30 in science.

That put our average youth on par with those from Portugal and the Slovak Republic, "rather than with students in countries that are more relevant competitors for service-sector and high-value jobs, like Canada, the Netherlands, Korea, and Australia," McKinsey noted.

Actually, our fourth-graders compare well on such global tests with, say, Singapore. But our high school kids really lag, which means that "the longer American children are in school, the worse they perform compared to their international peers," said McKinsey.

There are millions of kids who are in modern suburban schools "who don't realize how far behind they are," said Matt Miller, one of the authors. "They are being prepared for \$12-an-hour jobs - not \$40 to \$50 an hour."

It is not that we are failing across the board. There are huge numbers of exciting education innovations in America today - from new modes of teacher compensation to charter schools to school districts scattered around the country that are showing real improvements based on better methods, better principals and higher standards. The problem is that they are too scattered - leaving all kinds of achievement gaps between whites, African-Americans, Latinos and different income levels.

Using an economic model created for this study, McKinsey showed how much those gaps are costing us. Suppose, it noted, "that in the 15 years after the 1983 report 'A Nation at Risk' sounded the alarm about the 'rising tide of mediocrity' in American education," the United States had lifted lagging student achievement to higher benchmarks of performance. What would have happened?

The answer, says McKinsey: If America had closed the international achievement gap between 1983 and 1998 and had raised its performance to the level of such nations as Finland and South Korea, U.S. GDP in 2008 would have been between \$1.3 trillion and \$2.3 trillion higher. If we had closed the racial achievement gap and black and Latino student performance had caught up with that of white students by 1998, GDP in 2008 would have been between \$310 billion and \$525 billion higher. If the gap between low-income students and the rest had been narrowed, GDP in 2008 would have been \$400 billion to \$670 billion higher.

There are some hopeful signs. President Barack Obama recognizes that we urgently need to invest the money and energy to take those schools and best practices that are working from islands of excellence to a new national norm. But we need to do it with the sense of urgency and follow-through that the economic and moral stakes demand.

With Wall Street's decline, though, many more educated and idealistic youth want to try teaching. Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach for America, called the other day with these statistics about college graduates signing up to join her organization to teach in some of our neediest schools next year: "Our total applications are up 40 percent. Eleven percent of all Ivy League seniors applied, 16 percent of Yale's senior class, 15 percent of Princeton's, 25 percent of Spellman's and 35 percent of the African-American seniors at Harvard. In 130 colleges, between 5 and 15 percent of the senior class applied."

Part of it, said Kopp, is a lack of jobs elsewhere. But part of it is "students responding to the call that this is a problem our generation can solve." May it be so, because today, educationally, we are not a nation at risk. We are a nation in decline, and our nakedness is really showing.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

As everyone knows, President Barack Obama inherited a multitude of domestic and international problems.

But of all the foreign dilemmas right now, none rivals Pakistan. It is in serious danger of falling to the Taliban.

Can you imagine - a large, nuclear-armed state in Central Asia, ruled by cousins of the people who governed Afghanistan when it served as a congenial home for Osama bin Laden and all his murderous minions.

But the warnings are coming fast and thick from the highest officials, including Gen. David Petraeus, commander of American forces in that part of the world. The Taliban and allied extremists, he told the Senate this month, "could literally take down their state." Asif Ali Zardari, Pakistan's president, reflecting on American proposals for saving his nation, told a group of reporters: "It's a long walk. And in that long walk, I am losing the people of Pakistan."

In February, Taliban extremists fought the Pakistani army to a draw and won an agreement to establish a safe haven in the Swat valley, just 100 miles from Islamabad. At that time, I.E. Rehman, head of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission, said the Taliban and their militant allies were poised to take over the Punjab province, home to 60 percent of the population.

That has begun. Militants are taking control, one by one, of poor villages in northwest Punjab - beginning the spread of an insidious fungus that could eat the state.

The Pakistani police and military seem powerless to stop it. They lack the will to take on this fight, Sen. Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, has been arguing in recent days.

"They're in denial," said Marvin Weinbaum, a former State Department intelligence analyst for Pakistan and Afghanistan. "There's no sense of urgency," even though Pakistan is staring down the barrel "of a full blown, indigenous insurgency."

Even now, with the state's very existence at stake, military leaders continue their feckless debate over whether their central mission should be to prepare for a war with India - or take on these domestic threats. At the same time, American officials have begun urgently warning (what everyone already knew) that Inter-Services Intelligence agency officers are actually aiding the militants.

Meantime, Zardari provided a powerful symbol of his government's impotence. Earlier this month, a cell-phone video showed a Taliban enforcer flogging a 17-year-old girl lying face down in the dirt. Her crime: refusing a marriage proposal. The video made its way onto the Web and spawned outrage across the nation and the world; Pakistan's Supreme Court opened an investigation.

Well, amid all of this, Zardari signed an order last week codifying the Taliban's right to extend Islamic law across the Swat valley. A Taliban spokesman said that if the order had been signed earlier, the Taliban would not have merely whipped that unfortunate girl. They would have shot her.

Haven't we seen this play before - in Cuba, Cambodia, Nicaragua? In all three states, richly corrupt governments that were ill-serving the people still received unqualified support from Washington. American patronage of corrupt leaders fed enthusiasm for Fidel Castro's guerrilla army in Cuba, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua.

Certainly each of these previous revolutions had its own unique dynamics, but in each case, Washington and the threatened foreign leaders remained in denial until it was too late.

This time, Washington is waking up. But there's not much the United States can do. As Weinbaum put it, "if we put our hands on it, it's not helpful." He also told me that he used to discount the doomsayers who prophesied Pakistan's downfall.

"This is not Afghanistan," he would say.

"Pakistan has institutions and people advantaged by them who won't let Pakistan fall apart."

But he has changed his mind. "It's a feudal conflict now, class warfare. We weren't thinking of it in the terms that we are today."

At a conference in Tokyo last Friday, a dozen nations pledged \$5 billion in aid to Pakistan. At the same time, a prominent radical leader in Islamabad made a loud public call demanding imposition of Islamic Law nationwide. Which, I wonder, had the greatest impact inside Pakistan? Pakistan's oligarchy is beginning to realize it cannot rely on the military for protection; the generals now know that they cannot assume all of their men are on their side.

Soon, as the situation deteriorates, we could begin to see wealthy political and business leaders pack up and move out of the country. The Pentagon may have to pull up its contingency plans for safeguarding Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

Get ready.

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